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California Conservation Corps workers Isaac Lopez, left, and Joey Batterson trim trees and cut down brush as part of the Silver Fork Fuel Reduction Project. The USFS plans to thin the forest between strawberry and Pollock Pines over the next few years.

News

Forest fire management part of bigger strategy

By Dawn Hodson From page A1 | June 26, 2015

The sound of buzzsaws broke the silence of the forest off Silver Fork Road as crews from the California Conservation Corps worked to create a fuel break off Highway 50 near Kyburz on Wednesday.

Cutting down small trees and brush, stacks of vegetation were scattered everywhere as two teams cleared one side of the road.

Part of a much larger plan called the Roadrunner Fuel Reduction Project, the goal is to eventually treat both sides of Highway 50 all the way from Pollock Pines to Twin Bridges.

“That will take a couple of years to do,” said Will Harris, a battalion chief with the Forest Service. “But there is a plan and there is a vision.”

According to the U.S. Forest Service, the project will eventually reduce the amount of hazardous fuels on approximately 1,100 acres along Highway 50.

That corridor has suffered five large fires within the last 40 years including the Piliken Fire in 1973, the Wrights Fire in 1981, the Cleveland Fire in 1992, the Freds Fire in 2004 and the King Fire in 2014.

At the Silver Forks site crews from the CCC had been working since June 15.

Harris said he anticipated they would be there another month or so and then would move up to Strawberry and begin clearing brush there in order to create a fuel break.

In all, the Silver Fork fuel break is expected to include 64 acres and the Strawberry fuel break another 66 acres.

Come winter, all the piles of downed trees will be burned.

Mark Hanson, a CCC supervisor and project manager for the clean-up effort, said the Silver Fork area had been targeted because it is used heavily due to nearby campgrounds and communities in the area could also be affected if there were to be a fire.

Stationed out of the Meyers area, he said the CCC crews will continue to be involved with restoring the King Fire area including removing brush and erosion control.

“We’re excited about this partnership with the Eldorado National Forest,” he said. “It’s a first. But there are lots of worthwhile projects to help with.”

Keeping an eye on fires

To add to their tools for early detection and monitoring of wildfires, the Eldorado National Forest is also investing in the expansion of a new, one-of-a-kind, fire camera and multi-hazard tracking fire camera system. The system will be built on an emergency information platform that’s already in use for earthquake monitoring and response.

Operated by the University of Nevada at Reno as fire spotters, five cameras are already installed at different spots along with seismic equipment. Four monitor the Tahoe Basin and a fifth is in Nevada.

The images are microwaved to the University of Nevada computers and then posted to the internet where they are picked up by the Camino Interagency Emergency Command Center

and displayed on their screens. The public can view the cameras at alerttahoe.seismo.unr.edu.

The Eldorado National Forest is funding the installation of two more cameras to extend the project to the west slope of the Sierra. They will be installed at Sierra at Tahoe and at Big Hill Lookout with those images also sent to the command center.

Scott Wylie, the assistant command center manager, said the additional fire spotting cameras will augment having people in the lookout towers.

Eventually the University of Nevada wants 24 cameras in the Tahoe Basin and Eldorado National Forest. “The university is also working on a program for smoke detection using the cameras,” Wylie added.

Eldorado National Forest staff noted that all these efforts fit into what’s called a National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy.

In August 2014, the Eldorado National Forest was selected as one of two forests in California to participate in the program because of the risks to the South Fork of the American River Watershed. According to U.S. Forest Service officials, the need for a more proactive fuels management strategy was underscored by the King Fire, which burned 12 percent of the project area.

In all, the project area includes approximately 410,000 acres, including approximately 250,000 acres of the Eldorado National Forest with more than \$3.7 million allocated for removal of hazardous fuels and restoration of forest lands and improvements.

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CCC crews pile up forest fire fuels for a winter season control burn.

